DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 042 FL 018 785

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TITLE The Creative Use of Sentences.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Context Clues; *Creative Writing; Discourse Analysis; Foreign Countries; *Sentence Structure; *Syntax; *Writing (Composition)

ABSTRACT

Among the features characterizing human language is creativity, the ability to produce an infinite number of sentences with a finite number of rules. What is expected of creativity is non-conformity, violation of rules, and challenges to accepted convention. Words may be used to activate possible contexts. Most textbook sentence examples do not excite the imagination, but when their potential is exploited, they can take on the character of literature, adding lexis a little at a time and shaping context. Classroom procedures to exploit the potential of the sentence might include combining randomly selected sentences to stimulate manipulation of structures, arranging sentences with little apparent contextual possibility into a narrative, or asking students to supply expressions to make connections between semantically diverse sentences. In this way, students can be guided into fashioning fiction from what at first appears to be a list of random and unrelated sentences. Poetry can also be produced by this means. (MSE)

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The Creative Use of Sentences

H G Widdowson

Among the design features which are identified by linguists as characterising human language, one which figures prominently is creativity. By this is meant the capability of producing an infinite number of different sentences by reference to a finite number of rules. So, having internalized a rule for the syntactic combination of certain lexical categories like nouns and verbs and determiners and so on, and assuming that you know how other words fit into these categories, you can generate an endless series of expressions cut to the same pattern, all lexically different, but all syntactically the same. And of course learners have conventionally been required to display this kind of generative creativity in pattern practice:

The book is on the table.
The book is on the floor.
The book is on the chair.
The book is on the mat.
The cat is on the mat.
And so on, **ad infinitum**

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And, of course, any addition to your repertoire of rules and lexical store will immensely increase your creative powers, and you can go boldly on to more complicated combinations of constituents and more varied lexical exemplifications:

The book which belongs to my aunt is on the table.

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The book which belongs to my aunt who lives in Paddington is on the table. The book which belongs to my uncle is on the table which belongs to my aunt who lives in Paddington.

Again, **ad infinitum.** Or perhaps **ad nauseam.** For the distinctive feature of such demonstrations of generative power is that it is all really rather boring and inconsequential: a dull repetition of outputs. The fact is that although it may be evidence of creativity in one sense, it is not at all like creativity in the sense in which that term is customarily understood.

What we have here is conformity to rule. What we normally expect of creativity is, on the contrary, **non**-conformity, violations of rules, challenges to accepted convention. The very defining characteristic of creativity in the sense of generative power is in direct contradiction to the defining characteristic of creativity in the ordinary non-technical sense. Furthermore, we would usually assume that the non-conformity is motivated, that there is some reason for breaking free of rule, that the irregular is nevertheless relevant to some communicative purpose. A state of affairs, a thought, a feeling has arisen which cannot be accommodated within conventional modes of utterance. But of course this endless line of regimented sentences has no such purpose. As sentences they are simply devices for the actualization of abstract rules. They are quite disconnected from any context which would give them communicative point. They cannot meet any of the normal conditions of relevance. So they do not elicit the normal reactions to language use: which book are you referring to? which table? who is this aunt of yours in Paddington? so what?

The point about sentences as such is that they have no point. They are devices for exemplifying rules, and so they direct attention to the formal properties of syntax, to the internal working of the language. As such they **deflect** attention from the **external** working of the language and the way it keys in with contexts of use. The lexical content of these exemplifications is of no account, for the words are there not as contextual clues, which is their essential function in language use, but as sentence constituents. This is no doubt why the sentences that linguists and language teachers invent are often so dreary (**John loves Mary, The book is on the table**). In this way, attention is confined to linguistic form, and the mind is not distracted into the exploration of contextual possibilities.

But it is actually quite difficult to keep the mind focussed on form in this way. Our natural disposition is to find meaning by inferring a relevant connection between words and context, attending to grammar only to the extent necessary to make an appropriate fit. Grammar is a kind of tuning device. Consequently, words have a way of activating possible contexts.

So it is that when you want to demonstrate grammatical ambiguity, you have to be very selective in your choice of lexis. Consider the celebrated sentence:

Flying planes can be dangerous.

This is said to be ambiguous in a way that, for example, the sentence

Flying planes is dangerous.

is not. But then if we alter the lexis in the first sentence we can produce a sentence which is not ambiguous at all:

Flying glass can be dangerous.

So ambiguity arises when there is a particular **coincidence** of lexical and grammatical features. This is true of a great deal of semantic meaning which is said to be uniquely associated with certain grammatical forms. It turns out that the meaning is actually a function of the relationship between particular grammatical forms **and** particular lexical realizations.

So it is, too, that one quite often comes across sentences in textbooks which, though impeccable in form seem, because of their lexical content, entirely remote from any likelihood of occurrence as utterances in the real world. Here it is not a matter of what is semantically possible but of what is pragmatically plausible. Here are examples taken at random from a language teaching textbook:

They had been given a kick by that boy.
I drink a glass of beer at that pub.
That rich widow doesn't marry again.

In all these cases there seems to be a kind of deictic distortion, an incompatibility of space and time reference. " I hereby drink a (proximal) glass of beer at that (distal) pub," so to speak. Under what circumstances,

one might wonder would we feel impelled to adopt these incongruous perspectives and produce expressions such as these?

What we find odd about these sentences, then, is that they call up states of affairs which it is difficult for us to conceive of. In other words, it is hard for us to think of them as potential utterances. So long as we are dealing with dull commonplaces about books and pens on a table or the cat on the mat we can keep the mind in confinement, focussed on formal exemplification and undistracted by the possibilities of contextual association. But when we come across anything curious in the way of propositional content, the imagination is provoked into calling up some possible context or other. That is to say, we become creative, not by converging on the internal rule of grammar, but by diverging from its lexical realization in quest of external significance. We project a contextual meaning out of the encoded form.

Consider other textbook examples:

The squirrel was eating a nut.

Here the imagination has little to excite it. There may be a faint invocation of a rustic scene, but on the whole the sentence remains inert as a formal object, fixed like a museum piece. But what about:

That bear rides a bicycle.

This is much more promising. There is something here for the fancy to seize upon: visions, perhaps, of a circus , ringmaster, clowns, and this

pathetically comic creature wobbling grotesquely around the ring, and the glee of excited children.

John has got a new pair of gloves.

This is of no interest whatever. The imagination remains dormant and undisturbed. But:

John's friend had a fantastic necktie.

What kind of necktie could this possibly be that calls for such comment? Does it have a rude picture on it? Does it light up in the dark? The very word **fantastic** releases us from bondage to the sentence. John's friend is not just a noun phrase constituent any more. He has become humanized, a person whose neckties attract attention and are a cause for comment.

Andrew saw my bag on the chair.

Humdrum. There is nothing here to stimulate the imagination. But what about:

She breaks the chair on his head.

There is much more scope here. Who is she then, and what has happened previously to provoke such violence? Who is he? Perhaps an intruder unaware that his intended victim is an expert in the martial arts.

Sentences are devices for manifesting the internal operation of the generative

rules of grammar, but they can also be exploited to generate significance of a different kind. They can stimulate the mind to project possible contexts. They have pragmatic potential. Usually, of course, this potential is left unrealized, for such divergence would be disruptive in a class concentrating on pattern practice. But when the projective potential is exploited, these sentences become something different. They are no longer the **effect** of creativity in the conforming generative sense, but the **cause** of creativity in the different and more established meaning of the word. They in effect take on the character of literature.

For literature too presents us with propositions out of the blue and, dissociated as they are from contextual connections, we have to use them to create our own.

The new assistant arrived in the afternoon.

We could take this as a sentence: noun phrase, verb phrase, transitivity, past tense, and so on. A formal object. But it is actually the opening of a short story by Somerset Maugham. Reading it as such, we allow it to stimulate enquiry into contextual possibilities, to be confirmed or corrected as we proceed. Who is the new assistant? The definite article implies that we know who he is, and acts as a challenge to us to remedy our ignorance. Who then is he, and who is he assistant to, and assistant in what sense and in what kind of enterprise? Where exactly does he arrive? And what will happen next? There is no external context to refer. So we read on:

When the Resident, Mr Warburton, was told that the prahu was in sight he put on his solar topee and went down to the landing-stage...

A little of the location is sketched in: prahu, solar topee, landing - stage. The lexis adds a little here and a little there and gradually the context takes shape.

Again, consider this expression.

They got a first-class carriage to themselves.

Another sentence? It could be, but it isn't. It is actually the beginning of another Somerset Maugham story. Who then are these people?

They got a first-class carriage to themselves. It was lucky, because they were taking a good deal in with them, Alban's suitcase and a hold-all, Anne's dressing-case and her hat-box...

So the people are named, provided with luggage, take on life.

Alban and Anne got the carriage to themselves.

As it might be:

John and Mary went to the cinema.

But Mary and John, so long as they are confined as constituents of a sample sentence, are just nominal labels, not names; proper nouns but not persons.

Anne and Alban come to life. Although just as unreal as John and Mary, in that they have no referential counterparts in the actual world, they nevertheless take on identity as people in the internally created setting of the story.

Captain Jones's schooner was as good as ours.

This has the tang of narrative: another story opening perhaps? Alas no. This time we have only a sentence from a language teaching textbook. Who is this Captain Jones, and what is to happen with this schooner of his? Your guess is as good as mine. The possibilities are endless. Here is the seed of a story only waiting for imaginative germination. Every single sentence has this potential literary life. Since it is of nature dissociated from any existing context, it has the capability of creating its own. To produce a sentence in isolation is to be creative in the formal generative sense. To project contextual possibilities out of a sentence is to be creative in the imaginative literary sense. The question now arises as to whether we cannot exploit this creative potential in language pedagogy. I will come to this question in a moment. But meanwhile there is another feature of sentences which invites literary comparison.

Consider the following textbook sample:

You can drive as far as Paddington.

If we wanted to exemplify this particular structure further, we might produce sentences in parallel by varying the lexical realization of the

constituents, as we did before. This would demonstrate linguistic creativity, the generative power of the rule. For example:

You can drive as far as Bayswater.
You might drive as far as Golders Green.
You can walk as far as Kensington.

And so on, exploiting the endless creativity, in one sense, of the familiar substitution table. And in this way we can show the paradigmatic association of all these instances, their internal formal equivalence in respect of syntactic relations.

Now this vertical alignment of language is also to be found in literature. It is a defining feature of poetry. Here too we find expressions arranged in parallel, this time as lines of verse. Again the paradigmatic association signifies equivalence, but metrical in this case, not syntactic. And the resulting pattern is not internal to the language code but externally fashioned to create a context for the poem. As before, the sentence we started with provokes speculation about possible significance. You can drive as far as Paddington. Very well, but why would you wish to do this? What is it about Paddington that attracts your interest? What, in short, might the point be of making such a remark; what is its communicative purpose?

Well, let us explore one possibility by transposing the formal linguistic objects, the sentences, into the alternative vertical arrangement of lines of verse. We thus change linguistic to literary creativity by re-organizing the language into a different kind of parallel patterning, thereby

projecting a possible context into a poem. What might we come up with?

An example:

You can drive as far as Paddington,
Hampstead or Golders Green.
And never find a lovelier girl
Than the one that I have seen.

You might walk as far as Kensington,
Hyde Park or Leicester Square,
And never see, in all the crowds,
A girl who is as fair.

A lovelier girl than this one
I have never found before
In all my London wanderings.
And this girl lives next door.

Now I make no great artistic claims for this rather rudimentary piece of verse. But it does show, I think, that, as with the prose fiction we were considering earlier, exploiting the context-creating potential (poetential I almost said) of the sentence brings home to us in a particularly striking way the meaning which is intrinsic in language itself, drawing attention to the internal relations determined by rule by giving them communicative point. Traditionally, the internalization or memorization of rules was, of course, meant to be brought about by repetitive practice. The disadvantage

of this is that it can have the effect of focussing attention too exclusively and mechanistically on these internal formal relations and so deflecting attention from an imaginative awareness of their potential as use. What I am suggesting quite simply is that there are other ways of making these rules memorable, essentially by exploiting the fact that sentences, by definition dissociated from particular contexts, can therefore be interpreted as projecting their own and in this way they take on something of the essential character of literary texts. In the case of this little poem, for example, there is a repetition of structures through variable lexical realizations, but the repetition and the variation are motivated by the meanings that the poem is designed to convey.

It would appear, then, that we can, in principle, turn the literary potential or covert creativity of sentences to pedagogic advantage, relating the two kinds of creativity I have talked about, one which the sentence exemplifies, and one which it stimulates. In this way, we can exploit the very feature which has often been seen as reducing its scope for the expression of meaning, namely its isolation from context.

What form might such exploitation take? What kind of classroom procedures might we employ? Let us explore one possibility - a variant, as you will recognize, of fairly familiar practices. Begin with a couple of sentences. The following will do, taken at random (almost) from a grammar practice book:

The snow was falling on the roof.
The roof was full of holes.

The learners are required to combine these by making the second sentence into a non-defining relative clause, thus:

The snow was falling on the roof, which was full of holes.

And so on to the next pair of sentences , quite randomly lexicalized, for further structural manipulation. All contextual possibilities are, of course, disregarded and contextual projection stringently discouraged. But we want to take a quite different tack - the very opposite one in fact. We want to **activate** projection so that the context-creating potential of these expressions is exploited. With this in mind we might ask students to select from a given set of expressions those which extend the context of this first pair, and then arrange them in a sequence which represents a possible narrative. Let us suppose that the following is just such a set of expressions in this case.

The box was full of books.
There was a bottle on the table.
There was a knock on the door.
There were little pools of water everywhere.
Three men were sitting round a fire.
The sun was shining on the roof.
Two corpses lay on the wet floor.
A baby is crying.
They were trying to keep warm.
The wind blew through the broken door.
They were cold.

She was beautiful.

A sound came from the night outside.

They watched the burning coals.

Water was dripping on the floor.

The door suddenly burst open wide.

Apples are expensive these days.

Some of these sentences offer little in the way of contextual possibilities. It is hard to see, for example, how a box full of books can be relevantly accommodated into the picture projected from our first two sentences. A baby crying is perhaps a more likely candidate for inclusion in the scene, but then the tense does not fit: we are framed in the past. "Apples are expensive these days" is similarly remote. So these three sentences can be eliminated. They retain their sentence status and nothing grows out of them - the seeds of possible significance are not germinated. But other expressions are more promising. "Water was dripping on the floor." This follows coherently enough from the falling of the snow on the roof full of holes. And what about these three men sitting around a fire? And the corpses on the floor? It is not difficult to imagine them as part of the projected scene. And so we encourage the students to scrutinize each expression and look for possible connections so that they can order them sequentially into a passage of prose. One possible sequence might be:

The snow was falling on the roof. The roof was full of holes. Water was dripping on the floor. There were little pools of water everywhere. Three men were sitting round a fire. They were cold. They were trying to keep warm. Two corpses lay on the wet floor. A sound came from the night outside. There was a knock on the door...

A simple narrative takes shape, reading perhaps a little like some early and lost effort of Ernest Hemingway or Jack London. We might then induce learners to do a little editorial revision. Now, for example, they might be asked to combine the first two sentences by using a non-defining relative clause, but this time this and other structural alterations are directed at improving the story, they are not just exercises in linguistic manipulation:

The snow was falling on the roof, which was full of holes. Water was dripping on the floor and there were little pools everywhere. Three men were sitting round a fire, trying to keep warm...and so on.

But who are these three men and what have they been up to? And what of these corpses? What was the cause of death? And then the knock on the door...who can it be? What has happened here in this bleak place, and what will happen next? Read on. But there is nothing to read. The text has yet to be created. It is time to provide another set of sentences.

In this way, students can be stimulated and guided into the fashioning of fiction out of what at first appears to be simply a list of quite random and separate sentences. And of course the stimulation and guidance can be regulated by varying the language material which is provided, making increasing demands on the imagination and the proficiency of the students. We could, for example, give sentences which were more thematically diverse and require students to supply expressions of their own to make the connections clear, making coherence more evident by explicit cohesion.

Again, we could, with more advanced students, provide collections of words rather than sentences as stimulus, lexical raw material to be shaped into narrative.

And students could be required to produce poetry too by the same kind of procedure. In this case, of course, they would not fit the expressions end to end in horizontal combination, but would re-order them in vertical array, in association, as lines of verse. You will perhaps have noticed that rhymes have been subtly introduced into the original set of sentences as an aid to poetic composition. We might reasonably expect something (quite literally) along the following lines:

1. The snow was falling on the roof,
The roof was full of holes.
Three men were sitting round a fire.
They watched the burning coals.
Water was dripping on the floor.
The wind blew through the broken door...

2. The snow was falling on the roof,
The roof was full of holes.
Three men were sitting round a fire.
They watched the burning coals.
The wind blew through the broken door.
Two corpses lay on the wet floor...

3. The snow was falling on the roof.
The roof was full of holes.

Three men were sitting round a fire.
They watched the burning coals.
A sound came from the night outside.
The door suddenly burst open wide...

Notice that there is repetition here and a recurrent focussing on form. The learners have to examine the meaning of each sentence as this is signalled by lexis and grammar and then select and combine as appropriate. All this is done for a purpose: to exploit the possible contextual projections inherent in the given sentences, and it is easy to see how the tasks could be regulated to make increasing demands on student imagination and initiative. The whole process, whether applied to prose or poetry, is one of creative writing as a function of guided composition, and it is designed to develop linguistic and literary awareness as mutually supportive aspects of learning.

I do not wish to make any great claims for these procedures. The kind of literary linguistic activity I am proposing here is not a universal solution to the problems of language learning. But I think it is a line of enquiry and practice which is worth exploring. What, after all, activates the language learning process in particular settings with particular individuals is still a matter of mystery. All we can do is to create the most propitious conditions, provide stimulus, give guidance, exert benevolent direction where necessary. But there is little point in imposing restrictions on our enquiry by setting up a disparity between focus on form and focus on meaning, or between creativity and control, or between language and literature. As I have tried to show, there is no necessary disparity between them, and to insist that there is will only deprive

students of learning experience, and impoverish our pedagogy.